

Sheboygan Press.

LOCAL

'People are angry': Sheboygan residents, elected officials respond to city administrator's handling of director repeating a racial slur



Maya Hilty

Sheboygan Press

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SHEBOYGAN - Sheboygan is in the midst of “a public and employee relations nightmare,” city council person Betty Ackley said at the city council meeting last week.

That’s after a city director repeated a racial slur in an internal meeting and the Sheboygan Press reported on the city’s response to concerns from other staff.

The city council discussed personnel issues in closed session on Monday and last week.

Mayor Ryan Sorenson assured a crowded room at a council meeting last week that elected officials are listening to residents’ concerns, while the council voiced support for equity and government transparency.

The council also drafted a resolution limiting City Administrator Todd Wolf’s responsibilities, and instead giving Sorenson full responsibility for talking to the media as well as putting the process for hiring a director of Human Resources firmly in the hands of the mayor and council leadership.

The council “wishes to have the Mayor and the City Administrator focus on areas of strength,” the proposed resolution states.

Wolf is no longer talking to the Sheboygan Press, according to a preliminary understanding with council leadership, he wrote in an email to city council leadership obtained through an open records request.

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In emails to city council members obtained by the Sheboygan Press, some residents called for a public apology from the city director who repeated the racial slur and a budget that prioritizes work in diversity, equity and inclusion, such as long-term work with a DEI professional.

Some residents asked council members to reevaluate City Director Chad Pelishek's and Wolf's fitness for their positions. Residents also emphasized the importance of hiring a Human Resources director and suggested investigating sexual harassment and workplace retaliation in the city.

Sheboygan has not had an active Human Resources director since November 2021, when the former director took leave after hiring an attorney to protect herself against workplace retaliation, she wrote in her resignation letter months later.

Sheboygan has been trying to hire a Human Resources director since the former director resigned in June. One applicant offered the position rejected the city's offer this fall. The city administrator has since hired an outside firm to assist with hiring for the position.

More: Sheboygan council approves \$15 minimum wage for city employees, but it may not apply to library workers. Here's what to know.

Here's the context in which a city director said a racial slur and how the city administrator responded.

After a city employee and neighborhood liaison noticed a few uncomfortable and racist incidents while attending neighborhood association meetings, including a resident saying the N-word, she asked her supervisor how to address those situations if they happen again, according to emails obtained by the Sheboygan Press.

Her supervisor, Pelishek, Sheboygan's director of planning and development, asked other city staff for guidance at an August meeting of department heads. Pelishek said the N-word while saying that a resident had said the slur at a neighborhood meeting as he asked fellow staff how the city can help address such situations.

After other city staff raised concerns, Pelishek emailed an apology to department heads. Some residents say the apology missed the mark in failing to acknowledge the harm done.

"I regret saying [sic] full N word out loud and if I offended anyone it was not intended to be directed that way. I am sorry if you were offended," Pelishek wrote.

Wolf then hired a diversity, equity and inclusion consultant to facilitate a conversation about the incident with department heads.

Wolf was concerned not that a city leader repeated the racial slur but that city staff told people outside the meeting about the incident, saying a director who “let the information out” had breached trust.

Wolf admonishes city council for 'lack of support' in an email

After the Sheboygan Press reported on the city’s response to Pelishek repeating a racial slur, City Council President Barbara Felde emailed all city employees reminding them of the city’s Employee Assistance Program and a method to confidentially report suspected violations of the city’s code of conduct or policies.

“While we are taking the necessary steps to address concerns, we want to extend our support to our public servants and constituents,” Felde wrote. “Please know your Common Council is on standby for support.”

The following day, Wolf emailed city council leadership, including Felde, Council Vice President Roberta Filicky-Peneski and Sorenson, saying the council has failed to support city employees.

“I have dozens of employees crying, upset and ready to quit in the lack of support from the Council in this issue and many others in the last two plus years. This includes myself for the continued harassment,” Wolf wrote.

“The only support and change that the employees have said, that has been positive for the city and them has been the hiring of me into this position,” Wolf wrote. “(Alders) do not ask the people for the facts and clarification. Now is a time for the City Leadership to stand for the team that provides the service that you represent.

“The team is even scared to talk to anyone, as this is not a safe place anymore. They know more from the outside than many know from the right people in Council leadership positions.”

Wolf previously said he was “disappointed” in a city director who told a city council member, according to emails obtained by the Sheboygan Press, that Pelishek said the racial slur in an internal meeting.

More: Sheboygan County deputy faced firing after investigation that opened soon after he announced run for sheriff. Here's what we know.

More: Plymouth settles lawsuit of former city administrator Jordan Skiff, who was fired 9 months into the job

City council proposes limiting city administrator's responsibilities

A city council resolution proposed Monday "clarifying" the duties of the city administrator would effectively limit Wolf's responsibilities.

Although the city administrator is employed by the council and in charge of implementing council policies on a day-to-day basis, "the various roles of the City Administrator and the Mayor have evolved, often without much involving from the Common Council," the resolution states.

"The City Administrator has strong skills in project management, and the Common Council wishes to have him focus more time in this area of strength," it reads. "One way to do that is to direct the City Administrator to have the Mayor handle media relations and communication."

According to city ordinance, the director of Human Resources and Labor Relations is appointed by the council based on the recommendation from the city administrator and mayor.

Under the proposed resolution, the appointment would instead be "primarily directed by the Mayor and council leadership."

"Having that position filled by a strong candidate is one of the Common Council's highest priorities," the resolution reads.

The resolution will go to the Finance and Personnel Committee before returning to the full council for approval.

Sheboygan leaders and residents respond to concerns about city leadership and equity

At last week's council meeting, Mayor Sorenson said equity work needs to be a "fundamental component" of city operations.

"We have a lot of progress that we have made over the last couple of months, but we still have a long way to go," Sorenson said.

"I want to reassure people that the city is not a safe space for racism and racial tropes and it can never be," he said. "We have a lot of work ahead of us, I know we can do better and we will do better."

The city council passed a resolution reaffirming the council's commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging.

The council "believes that our leaders and staff need to be held to a high standard on matters of equity," "understands that leaders shall offer no excuses for offensive behavior," and "understands that leaders need to operate in full transparency and accountability," the resolution states.

Sorenson said elected officials have heard from a lot constituents on how the city can improve.

"From the calls, emails and in-person conversations with residents that I have had recently about this issue, people are angry," Ackley said. "I do not believe that (Pelishek's) communication was becoming of someone representative of the city's public face and leadership. I feel like all of us should be holding ourselves to a higher standard. We must be mindful of our words, even when quoting others.

"It is time to implement actionable change, it is not time to provide lip service," Ackley said.

Russ Otten, a Sheboygan resident and chairman of the Republican Party of Sheboygan County, said during public comment at last week's city council meeting that "it's very sad for our community that the Sheboygan Press decided to sensationalize (this situation)."

"Every one of you council members knows that what was stated by Chad Pelishek was not stated by him but a repetition of what was stated by someone else. Yet, not one of you had the guts to defend him," Otten said.

"Diversity is hugely important ... but diversity should be more than (race or gender). Diversity should be about diversity of thought," he said. "When we only have one thought, and everyone has to fall in line or be ostracized, we have a problem."

Other people in public comment and emails to city council members obtained by the Sheboygan Press called for more action by the council.

“Leadership requires the willingness to learn, the ability to model and the capacity to own one’s missteps,” said Jamie Haack, a resident and professional of diversity and inclusion work. “I urge the common council to seriously evaluate placements of Mr. Pelishek and Mr. Wolf and their current and future abilities to serve in their roles with the knowledge, transparency and values of equity and respect that are so needed in their positions.”

Brenda Richterkessing, another resident who has worked as a human resources director and taught educational seminars about sexual harassment and workplace retaliation, said in an email to the city council that, based off reporting on Wolf’s response, Wolf “is handling this in the exact opposite way than he should.”

“He sounds like someone that may be in over his head in terms of his ability to manage the leadership needed in our city,” Richterkessing wrote. “With no (Human Resources) director ... ironically because she is also suing the city for workplace retaliation ... this is a very dangerous crisis of leadership for our city.”

Reach Maya Hilty at 920-400-7485 or MHilty@sheboygan.gannett.com. Follow her on Twitter at @maya_hilty.